

Adult Learners' Perceptions on Online Learning

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has demanded online learning as an alternative to conventional classroom learning methods. The study's aim was to explore the advantages and challenges of online learning as perceived by adult learners of Maltese as a second language. Data was collected from 35 adult participants using semi-structured interviews comprised of open-ended questions. The interview results were analysed using the thematic analysis method with the help of NVivo software to identify commonalities in responses and group the data according to the respective themes. The advantages of online learning according to the participants included the ability to balance learning and domestic chores; to access subject content despite the absence of live learning sessions; and less susceptibility to challenges like fatigue, time-wasting traffic, preparation for school and limited parking space. On the contrary, poor Internet connectivity, lack of IT knowledge, lack of personal computers and distractions at home negatively impacted online learning. Lack of an Internet connection, IT skills and a personal computer or an Internet-enabled phone led to inequality in access to online learning sessions. Despite the shortcomings, participants perceived online learning to be a solution to suspended academic activities. This research concludes with a number of solutions to overcome the issues presented by online learning.

Keywords: Online learning, COVID-19, adult learners, benefits of online learning, challenges of online learning.

1. Introduction

Distance learning took place during the 1800s. Back then, learning involved posting parcels to students who could not reach university campuses (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2016). During the 1900s, communication technologies emerged. Students began learning using radio sessions which were broadcasted over extended distances.

Online learning began in 1982 at the Western Behavioural Sciences Institute in La Jolla (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2016). The programme involved delivering instruction to a group of executives using computer conferencing. In 2000, only 8% of students had enrolled in online learning programmes. Online learning continues to exhibit a rising trend with an evident increase from 30% to 50% enrolment in 2013 and 2018 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2016). In March 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic prompted both young and adult learners to start online learning as a strategic measure to promote the social distancing critical to minimising the spread of the highly contagious disease (Pavlov and Wu, 2021; Teixeira & Zapata-Ros, 2021).

Rationale/Motivation of the Study

This research focusses on adult learners who want to pursue their studies but are unable to attend classes due to their adult commitments. For such learners, the majority of educational institutions around the world have developed a new and virtual teaching method as an alternative, which can be referred to as both online and

distance learning. The online learning approach was considered convenient since it limited contact between students and teachers and ensured each participant was free of the risks of contracting COVID-19 within the learning environment. Individuals who were vulnerable to COVID-19 leveraged the opportunity to continue their studies online (OECD, 2020a). The demand for online learning rose because of the flexibility and convenience it guaranteed to learners. Therefore, this study was conducted in response to this issue of concern.

The government of Malta ordered all schools to close in mid-March 2020 (Żammit, 2020) following a surge in COVID-19 cases worldwide (OECD, 2020a). Online classes were necessary to offset the learning inconveniences caused by school closure (OECD, 2020a). Thanks to online learning, education programmes and curriculum syllabi were maintained despite school closures (OECD, 2020a). The suspension of face-to-face learning programmes was unconditional (Żammit, 2020). Both educators and learners had no idea of when schools would reopen and classroom learning would resume (Żammit, 2020). It can thus be noted that the purpose of this study is to explore the issues encountered by adult learners when studying Maltese as a second language (ML2) during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus identifying the manner in which online classes served as a salvation for learners in bridging the gap between them and their teachers and eliminating most issues in their learning process.

Contribution of the Study

This research could be used as a reference for understanding as well as for planning new research on topics concerning distance education, and, most notably, how we can use an online platform to deal with pandemic-related issues to minimise the negative effects of lockdowns and closures of educational institutions. This can be inferred from the study's in-depth and generalised interpretation of the distance learning process in this world of modernization and technological advancement, and its relevance to the current learning environment. Furthermore, evaluating the effects of adult online learning might assist in the accomplishment of newer outcomes in this domain, and could be of great assistance to adult learners and teachers in the near future.

Research Objectives

This study seeks to explore the perspectives of ML2 adult learners on online learning as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To accomplish this objective, the following objectives have been established:

- Identifying adult learners' perspectives on online learning
- Exploring the positive and negative aspects of online learning according to the participants.

2. Literature Review

Perspectives on Online Learning

According to OECD (2019), online learning refers to an interactive learning approach entailing the delivery of instruction over the Internet. Lister (2014) stated that “designing online learning involves choosing components which help enhance student learning and allow learners to engage with the content” (p. 671). Online learning is defined as an e-learning education programme encompassing teaching and learning over the Internet (Perry and Pilati, 2011; Dhawan, 2020). In comparison, Adnan and Anwar (2020) and Hodges et al. (2020) asserted that online learning is considered distance learning since it does not involve face-to-face interaction between the teacher and the student. However, the sessions remain interactive since learners and teachers exchange information (Adnan and Anwar, 2020). Al Gammal, Sharaf and Bleek (2020) and Orero and Tor-Carroggio (2018) found that e-learning requires an Internet-enabled device with a stable data service to streamline learning with minimal interruptions, such as network failure. According to Orero and Tor-Carroggio (2018), the feature limits access to online learning to just a few learners who can afford stable Internet and a personal computer to facilitate learning.

The shift from the traditional classroom to online learning is ideal since it provides learners with an opportunity to access instruction from any place (Anke & Schumann, 2018). A student can access online learning classes provided they have stable Internet and a supporting device to facilitate learning (OECD, 2019). Smartphones and personal computers are considered ideal in facilitating online learning since they are Internet-enabled and provide students an interactive interface which they can use to interact with their teachers. However, smartphones are considered disruptive to learning due to their multiple functions. For example, apps such as WhatsApp, Gmail, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter have been identified to be disruptive to learning (OECD, 2019). In particular, app notifications divert students' focus from class, limiting their concentration on the teachers' instructions (Wong et al., 2019). Despite the limitation, online learning eliminates the geographical barrier to learning and increases learner, teacher and institutional compliance with COVID-19 pandemic guidelines requiring social distancing and minimal face-to-face interactions among learners (Zammit, 2021).

Online learning compensates for traditional classroom learning deficits concerning access and acquisition of what has already been taught. Online lessons are video and record-enabled (OECD, 2020a). The sessions can be captured and stored on digital media for later retrieval and use. Thus, students can access lesson content for sessions they miss (OECD, 2019). Adults have room for listening or watching live lesson sessions to understand what was taught in their absence. This aspect allows learners to catch up with their colleagues. It also manifests as a practical learning strategy to ensure students' constant focus on content, rather than simultaneously taking notes in traditional classroom settings.

According to Fatonia et al. (2020), the advent of the Internet and computer technology has led to increased manufacturing of diverse devices that support live interactions. Farrah and al-Bakry (2020) and Uroкова (2020) held that online learning resources have helped institutions to virtualise learning, mimicking the actual classroom learning setting. The development of advanced applications like Zoom, Skype, Teams and WhatsApp has enhanced online learning's convenience and flexibility. In particular, Zoom and Teams facilitate student and teacher interaction in a class-like setting that strengthens learner–instructor relationships (OECD, 2019). All online learning applications for mobile phones and personal computers offer space to store information (Zammit, 2021). The non-volatile storage allows students to access subject content even if they miss the live sessions (OECD, 2019). Stored notes can be retrieved for reference after an extended period (Zammit, 2021).

Irrespective of the distance between students and teacher, instructions can be shared without the need for physical contact, rendering online learning an adequate pandemic response strategy likely to allow continuity of learning despite school closures (Teixeira & Zapata-Ros, 2021). The contemporary online learner has an opportunity to ask questions during interactive sessions, just like in traditional classroom settings (Cuschieri & Calleja Agius, 2020). Teachers also gain from online learning programmes since they can teach at a convenient time (Said Pace, 2020). The condition gives teachers room to accomplish their routine tasks at home (Said Pace, 2020). The online learning features also disclose individual students' names, helping educators identify and address them by their respective names (Said Pace, 2020).

The Influence of Online Learning

Language learning plays a significant role in our life in today's globalized environment, as "if you go to a foreign land where people speak a different language from your native language, you need to acquire that foreign language. It can be done with little formal learning of the language through your everyday interaction with the native people in the market place, work place, parks or anywhere else" (Hoque, 2017, pp. 1-2). Therefore, language learning refers to the intentional process of formally learning to interact in a language within and outside the classroom environment (Hoque, 2017). However, according to Paepe (2018), this learning procedure has changed significantly over time, and people are increasingly interested in enrolling in online language courses, which often enable them to learn an L2 through face-to-face contact and from any location of their choice.

Zammit (2021) and OECD (2020) hold that despite online learning proving crucial, it is limited to a few learners and educators. Online learning requires specialised Internet-enabled devices like smartphones and personal computers to support teaching and learning (OECD, 2019). Both smartphones and personal computers are relatively expensive for middle- and low-class learners (Dhawan, 2020). Thus, only students who have funds to purchase the devices can access online classes. Students can also be limited by data subscriptions (Zammit, 2021). These aspects render online learning less inclusive.

Positive and Negative Impacts of Online Learning

Thirty percent of online learners consider the method more distractive (Said Pace, 2020). Another 15% of adult learners regard online learning distractions as detrimental to attention, concentration and focus on subject matters (OECD, 2020a). The assertions depict online learning as a setback to focusing and comprehending subject content. Some of the distractions cited include noise from neighbourhoods, children playing and the need to attend to domestic chores despite learning taking place (OECD, 2019). Noise could limit the learners' concentration and understanding on the lesson content (Wang, Lin, & Huang, 2021). However, according to Koszalka, Pavlov and Wu (2021) and Teixeira and Zapata-Ros (2021) online learning has emerged as a solution to the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic that led to the indefinite suspension of classroom learning, especially for adult learners. Therefore, despite the distractions inherent in online learning, it remains a critical solution for reducing the spread of COVID-19 by limiting interactions through social distancing. Furthermore, in terms of noise, Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) reported that online platforms for distance learning can provide teachers with opportunities to implement strategic measures aimed at creating a more desirable learning environment. In reality, online education can allow teachers a lot of power by simply clicking on the mute button next to the students' faces, thus resolving the problem of any disruption (Zammit, 2020).

Online learning has been of great advantage since it is not time consuming. Traffic jams, searching for a parking space, extended preparation time and the need for formal clothing are regarded as challenges to time management in the traditional classroom setting. Traffic jams are linked to diminishing punctuality in class attendance (Zammit, 2021). Preparation time eats into vital time that could otherwise be dedicated to learning (Zammit, 2021). In addition, formal dressing, such as matching top and pants colours, is probably considered demanding and an impediment to expressing personal lifestyles regarding fashion and dressing. In contrast, online learning allows learners to prepare for lessons at their convenience (OECD, 2019). No formal dressing or travelling is required to attend online classes (Busuttil & Farrugia, 2020). These factors could help online learners to utilise personal learning schedules and embrace their desired lifestyles (Zammit, 2021).

Lifestyle factors can also lower the efficacy of online learning (OECD, 2020a). Instead of focusing on classroom content, about 33.5% of online learners focus on their lifestyles at the expense of learning (OECD, 2019). In particular, online learning grants the learners' freedom to dress, eat and attend lessons at will (Zammit, 2021). Non-committed students leverage the opportunity to concentrate on their lifestyles without considering the performance implications of their decisions (Zammit, 2021). Hence, despite online learning being a solution to the surge in cases of COVID-19, it remains a setback to fostering high performance among less-focused students. The situation renders online learning unequal and likely to advantage only focused learners.

Research Question

What are the benefits and challenges of online learning for adult learners of Maltese as a second language?

3. Methodology

Research Design

The research used a qualitative approach to investigate the various perspectives of ML2 adult learners on online learning, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study followed an ethnographic perspective, entailing the beliefs and perceptions of a specific group of 35 adults between 30 and 78 years old on online learning. The participants were chosen following the convenience sampling technique considered simple and easy in collecting data from a large population (Bornstein et al., 2017). The method was

appropriate for selecting 35 adults to represent a large group of adult learners of ML2 at intermediate level (i.e. CEFR Level B2). The participants were multinationals from countries like Italy, India, Pakistan, England, the Philippines, Russia and Finland, and thus, allowed for diversification of findings concerning the varied experiences and perceptions of online learning. Only learners engaged in online learning were considered eligible to participate in the study since they had first-hand online learning experiences.

Data Collection

The participants were interviewed using semi-structured interviews comprised of open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to use open-ended questions to help the interviewees provide detailed responses (Magaldi & Berler, 2020) about their online experiences. This approach gave room for further discussion to gain reliable insights into the advantages and disadvantages of online learning. Open-ended questions also ensured respondents were less limited in responding to questions, and allowed the interviewer to collect more detailed evidence of the advantages and shortcomings of online learning.

The interviews were conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each interview lasted roughly half an hour, totalling eighteen hours of interviews.

The following were the interview questions:

1. What made you decide to take an online course?
2. Do you know someone who can help you if you have any technical problems?
3. How do you find online learning using ICT in learning Maltese?
4. What are the advantages of online learning for you?
5. Have you ever had any disadvantages to online learning?

Data Analysis

The interview results were analysed using the thematic analysis method with the help of the NVivo software. The NVivo software is a qualitative analysis software that identifies prevalent themes from survey data (Paré & Trainer, 2020). The software identifies commonalities in response and groups the data according to the respective themes (Paré & Trainer, 2020). The data obtained was evaluated by the NVivo application, and the categorized themes, mainly pointed out the benefits and drawbacks of online ML2 learning, as perceived by 35 ML2 adult learners.

Risks of Bias

Some participants had no access to either computers/laptops or the Internet, or both. As a result, they only depended on their peers who provided them computers/laptops during Maltese classes. At times, the learners could not get access to computers or the Internet. This situation made these students engage less often or be absent from online learning sessions, and could have increased the risks of collecting biased information from the students with an increased likelihood of online learning's negative depiction.

Validity and reliability

After interviewing the respondents, the researcher used the member-checking technique to assess construct validity by providing the transcripts to the participants to check them and reduce any instance of personal bias. Thomas (2017) stated that member checks are crucial in securing the respondent's permission to use quotations.

The researcher has used purposeful sampling to achieve a valid sample size (Patton, 2002). The researcher also maintained methodological accuracy and implemented self-correcting procedures by using a member-control tool. Verification methods and systematic methodological precision are essential measures of effective research (Morse et al., 2002).

Ethical Considerations

After the researcher obtained ethical permission from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee of the University of Malta, all participants were briefed about the study before participation. They were not allowed to consent until they understood the objectives of the study. Participation was voluntary, and students had the freedom to withdraw from the study at will. The respondents' anonymity was upheld to ensure privacy and confidentiality. The names used in the interview transcripts are pseudo names deliberately used to render the interview respondents anonymous (Surmiak, 2018).

4. Findings

Answering the Research Question: *What are the benefits and challenges of online learning for adult learners of Maltese as a second language?*

Advantages of Online Learning

This theme concerns the benefits of online learning. Online learning was considered an opportunity to use computer literacy. The Indian respondent, Namata said:

Although I am 78, I am very proud of myself for managing to be computer literate thanks to the help of my children and nephews. Now, I am learning Maltese through online lessons. I feel so lucky.

The respondent's acknowledgment of online learning as luck implied that the programme suited her and provided a double opportunity to learn and exercise computer literacy skills. The outcome also reveals that computer literacy is critical in online learning. Nonetheless, the respondent did not acknowledge the usefulness of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the contrary, the Russian housewife, Irina, mentioned COVID-19 pandemic. Irina said:

As I have got lots of commitments such as taking care of a new-born and a dog and I need to go to work, I consider COVID pandemic as a blessing in disguise. If it wasn't for the pandemic, there would have been no online learning. Although I have a lot of noises at home and sometimes, I need to feed my baby during the lesson, I hope that we will continue to have online lessons instead of going to classes.

One of the pandemic guidelines aimed at reducing its spread regards social distancing. Since online classes are carried out over the Internet with learners and teachers at distant locations, it does not culminate in direct contact. This aspect renders online learning adherent to COVID-19 pandemic guidelines. Free interactions over the Internet render online learning convenient in promoting seamless learning without interrupting students, for instance, by social distancing them in traditional classroom settings.

Online learning is regarded as flexible and convenient. According to the ML2 students, online learning allowed them to carry out domestic chores besides embarking on their studies. Irina cited that despite her commitments, online learning has helped her to attend to her domestic and workplace needs and attend ML2 classes at the same time. This aspect presents online learning as a solution to people with multiple responsibilities. However, Irina also held that her online learning setting including noise from her children and pets, was sometimes disruptive. This condition indicated that online learning is susceptible to environmental disruptions that could limit its viability. Despite the bad experiences, Irina insisted that online learning was preferable to traditional classroom learning methods. Her sentiments were supported by the Italian respondents, Clara and Marika, who held that online learning was more convenient since they did not have to struggle in traffic jams to attend their evening classes and it was easier to meet their adult commitments. Clara stated, "I prefer online lessons than going to evening classes because I do not need to deal with traffic and finding a parking spot."

Marika claimed:

Since I do not need to waste my time in traffic, putting on make-up before class, matching the colours of my top and pants and to find a parking spot, I feel that I am being more productive thanks to online learning

These aspects present online learning as a solution to learners' challenges to attend classes and accomplish their routine domestic activities.

The flexibility of online classes manifests in the ease of access to classes despite absence during live lessons. The Russian respondent, Vladimir, acknowledged the convenience of online learning in helping him keep his doctor's appointments:

When I miss a Maltese online lesson as I have a doctor's appointment, my teacher records the online lesson and I watch it during my own free time. This could not be done in a normal classroom lesson. that he could watch during his leisure time.

This recording feature is not present in the conventional classroom setting. Hence, online learning is presented as a solution to traditional classroom environments in which lessons can neither be recorded nor retrieved for interactive learning. The traditional classroom environment also has fixed learning schedules which limit learning at one's convenience.

The Finnish participant, Tytti, linked online learning to individual recognition by teachers. Tytti stated, "I am glad that finally my teacher is calling me by name. Before we went online, she used to forget my difficult name." The respondent presents online learning as an aid to recognition of individual students, implying that online learning is more interactive and personalised than traditional classroom learning. Despite the personalised learning, the Filipina nun, Sister Shai said, "I feel that I am less shy online and I participate more during lessons." Her perception of online learning reveals that the approach is likely to foster concentration in class, enhance comprehension and promote students' overall performance.

The Dutch participant, Talin, linked online learning with reduced back pain, while the Swedish participant, Theo, associated online learning with reduced winter cold exposure. Talin said:

It is so easy to get access to the lesson's material online. It is better than carrying textbooks, papers or the laptop with us to class. I used to suffer from back pain for carrying the lesson's material with me and walking all the way from where I parked to class.

These experiences make online learning a solution to health complications, mainly fatigue and back pain. Theo said:

I feel so lucky that I just need to stay at the comfort of my house to learn online. I do not need to go out in bad weather or in the evening on a cold winter day. I have got a lot of support from my nanny to take care of my kids while I am learning Maltese online.

Theo's assertion that online learning reduced his exposure to winter implies online learning is more convenient and independent of weather conditions. Weather seemingly cannot impede online learning since every learner can access online classes from the comfort of their homes, provided they have access to the Internet and supporting devices. The Pakistani respondent, Nazia stated:

Online lessons make you feel closer to the teacher and the other learners. I can see their names on the screen and that's great for me since I tend to forget names.

She revealed that online learning promotes classroom awareness and recognition of the social nature of education. Nazia asserted that online classes helped her get adequate support from her teachers and peers. Furthermore, online interactions ease socialisation during the pandemic which has limited movement and free interaction. Similarly, the Ukrainian respondent, Nataliya said, "As I live in a flat on my own, I feel less isolated at home with online learning." Nataliya's experience indicates that online learning enhances social relations and eliminates loneliness, which often leads to boredom and the risk of psychological disorders, mainly stress, anxiety and depression, especially during a pandemic (Heeren, 2020).

Online learning minimises time wastage and thus enables one to be more productive (Nortvig, 2014). The Czech participant, Martina claimed:

How comfortable and relaxing it feels to just wear a nice top and blazer over your trouser pyjamas and house slippers and learn Maltese online while sipping my coffee and eating cake. No more wasting time in traffic jams and trying to match the colours of my tops and skirts before classes. What a relief thanks to online learning!

Thus, online learners save time that they can utilise in other activities they have to accomplish. For example, ML2 learners can use their time to integrate with local people and communicate in Maltese while engaging in their co-curricular activities, which are vital in building their ML2 competences.

Disadvantages of Online Learning

The lack of Information Technology (IT) skills disadvantaged ML2 adult learners who needed to take their lessons together with their peers who had adequate IT knowledge. The English maid, Gabby said, "I do not like online learning because I lack IT skills and so I do not know what to do when I need to attend an online lesson of Maltese. I am not attending any Maltese lessons anymore."

Thus, online lessons are less inclusive and detrimental to even access to subject content. Another aspect which renders online learning less inclusive is the differentiated access to the Internet. Lack of a computer and an Internet connection impeded access to online learning sessions. The Libyan respondent, Mohammed claimed:

I need to find employment. Do you think that I have any access to the Internet or a computer where I am living in the Hal Far Migrant Open Centre? I cannot attend classes of Maltese if they are held online.

The Internet connection issue was cited by the English barber, Jeremy, who stated:

Sometimes I do not have Internet access. Maybe because everyone living in my block is using the computer. I am so frustrated when I can't continue the Maltese lesson because all of a sudden, I do not have any Internet access.

The Pakistani nurse, Nazia, presented online learning as a vulnerable method that could be easily interrupted, when she said, "I do not like it when our online lesson is interrupted due to a power cut." According to Nazia, blackouts interrupted learning. This outcome showed that online learning depends on power supply. This means that online learning could disadvantage learners living in areas without electrical power connectivity or with frequent power cuts, rendering online learning inequitable.

Online learning is dependent on individual characteristics. While some learners can hear the teacher well during online lessons, others cannot. Clara said, "Sometimes, I do not hear the teacher well online and I am shy to tell my teacher several times that I am not hearing and understanding her well." Similarly, the German student, Daniel said, "I hate looking at the screen all the time. My eyes are hurting me due to a lot of screen time. I prefer classroom teaching." Both Clara and Daniel depicted online learning as less effective and detrimental to the optimal state of the learner's senses.

Talking a second language is regarded as a practice and a characteristic of experiential learning that fosters comprehension (Boggu, 2019). Besides the Maltese teacher, learners cannot talk much to Maltese native speakers in online sessions due to COVID-19 social distance and limited physical interaction. The Greek vet, Jane said:

How can I learn Maltese if I never talk to Maltese people considering social distance due to COVID-19? Although I am learning Maltese online, I am not making any progress because I am not talking to any Maltese person, besides my Maltese teacher. Besides this, classroom lessons were more entertaining, and I used to meet the other students for coffee after our evening classes.

Jane argues that she and her peers were not making any progress since they did not practise Maltese by talking to Maltese nationals. Jane also held that they do not feel connected since they learn from distant locations, unlike when they used to learn in classrooms; the lessons also used to be funnier. Therefore, Jane considered online learning less effective in fostering interactions and the live practice of Maltese during interactions.

Distractions are also evident in online learning. Any form of noise diverts attention during learning. The Serbian single mother, Jasmina, contended:

I cannot find peace at home. How can I concentrate on learning Maltese online if there are too many distractions such as my three young kids jumping, running and playing around or cry for attention, my two dogs and the noise of construction building of new block near my block?

This outcome shows that online learning is susceptible to environmental distractions (Kratz et al., 2020). As a result, it does not suit every place since it is dependent on specific environmental conditions, primarily silence and isolation. Therefore, a particular, dedicated online setting is required to avoid distractions. This requirement renders classroom learning more convenient since it only hosts learners with the same goal, unlike homes where every person has a different goal and activity to undertake.

5. Discussion

Schools worldwide, especially for adult learners, have opted for online classes to ensure learning continuity despite the restrictions aimed at minimising the spread of COVID-19 (OECD, 2020a). Online classes were adopted due to the need to limit in-person classes and uphold COVID-19 guidelines requiring people to social distance themselves. Online learning necessitated learning at the learners' homes, limiting their interactions and the risk of inconveniences caused by travel bans. This could be supported by the fact that e-learning presents a threat to both teachers and students in terms of technologies and connectivity, but it keeps everyone occupied with worksheets, online lessons, and assignments (The Hindu, 2020).

Fatonia et al. (2020), Farrah and al-Bakry (2020) and Uroкова (2020) agreed that online learning is an on-demand instruction method allowing students and teachers to interact over the Internet. This approach has helped adult learners balance their learning, adult commitments and work life due to its flexibility. According to Farrah and al-Bakry (2020) and Uroкова (2020), online learning allows students to engage in other activities during class sessions with a provision for later access to what was taught. In online classes, live lessons are recorded and stored for future retrieval and reference (Zammit, 2021). Thus, students who miss online lessons can access the course content and learn at a more convenient time. It can therefore be stated that 'flexibility' plays a significant role in understanding the need and importance of online learning. This is because students can make up their mind and even schedule their tasks in hand, thereby completing every course in the virtual platform.

Traditional classroom teaching and learning approaches require the physical presence of both the teacher and the student. The method is subject to time scheduling and distance, traffic and parking constraints that could inhibit learning. About 28% of adult learners claimed that classroom learning is less convenient due to work commitments (OECD, 2020a). Fifteen per cent of adults reported family responsibilities as hindrances to attending classroom sessions. As a result, adults considered online learning a solution to their challenges since it allows them to accomplish their routine tasks (OECD, 2020a). Learners considered e-learning appropriate since it does not interfere with their routine schedules (Zammit, 2021). Education stakeholders consider the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic opportune to testing the efficacy of online learning (Di Pietro et al., 2020).

In contrast, 12% of learners considered the COVID-19 pandemic a hindrance to learning, since they argued that online learning often occurs at inconvenient times and places that limit learning (OECD, 2020a). Another 16% cited that the lack of financial capability to procure online learning resources renders the approach less appropriate and applicable to a socially diversified class. Some of the resources required in online learning include a computer and a stable Internet connection. The lack of these two resources has made some learners miss class sessions (Cuschieri & Calleja Agius, 2020). However, they cannot opt for classroom learning due to the suspension of in-person classroom training due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The OECD (2019) held that IT skills, a computer and an Internet connection are the primary requirements for online learning. Lack of any of these resource makes online learning incomplete and inexecutable. According to OECD (2019), 23% of adults with adequate IT skills participated in online training compared to 14% of learners with limited IT skills. The data reveals why some respondents cited that they could not participate in online learning due to a lack of IT skills and/or resources. The OECD (2019) substantiated that about 5% of adult learners have digital literacy, while 15% lack basic computer skills. Therefore, most adults cannot participate in online learning sessions. As a result, in this technologically advanced environment, adult learners must focus on upgrading their expertise, especially in the areas of professional development, personal growth, ability enhancement, and empirical comprehension, among others (Jimoyiannis, & Gravani, 2020).

The OECD (2021) found that most classroom learning was continued after the adoption of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The method has had an effect on adult learners who lack computer literacy skills and also network knowledge, digitized problem-solving, media literacy, and information literacy. Part-time learning has been impacted due to the need to concurrently attend to workplace and learning commitments. However, some governments have allowed off-the-job training with no workplace commitments so that adult learners can attend e-learning sessions (Cuschieri & Calleja Agius, 2020). This approach is contrary to adults learning ML2, who did not disclose any initiative allowing them to stay out of the workplace. In Italy's case, non-profit organizations are facilitating online internships for learners to help them actualise their skills. In contrast, Maltese online teachers did not disclose any internship arrangement to help students practise the language (Žammit, 2020). Some of the present study participants complained about online learning as limiting their interaction with native Maltese speakers to practise what they learned.

Some of the respondents cited the lack of Internet connectivity, computers and basic IT skills as a hindrance to accessing online learning programmes. Without digital skills assistance, most adult ML2 learners are at a higher risk of missing online class sessions. The most significant skills are technical issues, which are followed by the teachers' teaching techniques and their shortcomings in technical skills (Coman, Țiru, Meseșan-Schmitz, Stanciu, & Bularca, 2020).

Pomerantz (2019) and Murray (2019) argued that the COVID-19 pandemic provided countries with an opportunity to encourage online learning. Murray (2019) substantiated that online learning is an appropriate measure for upholding COVID-19 social distancing guidelines while ensuring continuity in learning. Pomerantz (2019) and Murray (2019) asserted that the situation provides countries with an opportune time to ensure teachers and learners are equipped with adequate digital skills in response to mobility restrictions limiting traditional classroom learning. Allo (2020) asserted that it is the primary responsibility of teachers to develop

creative and innovative skills so that learners can be engaged in the learning process, thus keeping them appropriately updated about the courses to be taken on the online platform. Yet Koszalka, Pavlov and Wu (2021) and Teixeira and Zapata-Ros (2021) asserted that some adults still find online learning challenging and prefer classroom learning. Perhaps awareness about the importance of online learning as a strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic should be emphasised to foster adult learners' participation in online learning classes.

OECD (2020) and Zammit (2021) asserted that adult learning has granted adult learners an opportunity to pursue their education goals with limited influence on their lifestyles. Lack of official classroom dressing, which is not necessary for online learning sessions, allows adult learners to dress according to their tastes and preferences (Zammit, 2021). The adults also have an opportunity to eat meals of their choice at a convenient time. They have been relieved of the potential backpains of carrying learning resources, mainly books and personal laptops, to their respective classrooms. These practices culminate into freedom to embrace unique lifestyles (Koszalka, Pavlov, & Wu, 2021). The assertion is in line with the respondents' assertions that online learning allowed them to learn from their homes, dress as they like and eat at any time.

Zammit (2020) held that despite these advantages, adult learning segregates learners with respect to access to the Internet, computers and basic IT skills. With low computer literacy among adults, most of them are likely to overlook online learning classes. Inequality in online learning could lead to demotivation of learners with limited IT skills and those who lack access to the Internet or a computer to facilitate online learning. Compounded with the adversities wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, this situation is also linked to an overall increase in stress, depression and anxiety among learners (Teixeira & Zapata-Ros, 2021). Distractions by noise from pets, playing children and construction sites contribute to increased stress due to the disruption of learning through the diversion of attention and inability to concentrate. The assertions substantiate the current study's findings, which depicted online learning as a method susceptible to distractions and a lack of concentration (Zammit, 2021). Despite the shortcomings, online learning is still regarded as the most appropriate approach to balancing the responsibilities of work, family and education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Limitations

Interviews were carried out within a limited geographical region due to mobility restrictions to minimise the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Therefore, data was collected from one setting, thereby impeding interpretation of the study outcomes concerning a more diversified participant base. In addition, the study did not involve a control group. This situation implies that the outcomes were not subjected to validation.

7. Recommendations

Despite most learners' acknowledgement of the convenience of online learning, inclusivity emerged as a significant setback in delivering and acquiring ML2 skills online. Internet accessibility, possession of a computer and basic IT skills were the most significant challenges to online learning. Therefore, adult learners need to undergo IT training before they start online learning. Learners can also be trained at the early stages of their lives to embrace online learning later in adulthood. Regarding Internet access and computers, governments should partner with learning institutions to make learning inclusive by ensuring the availability of stable Internet networks and computers for adult learners who cannot access them.

Distractions by pets, children and noise from construction sites in the neighbourhoods were cited as a hindrance to online learning. The issue is dependent on the learning environment. Therefore, learners have control over it. Learners can identify an isolated room free of distractions to use during online learning sessions. Alternative facilities other than homes can be identified and used exclusively during online learning sessions.

8. Conclusion

The increased demand for online learning was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic which led to the creation of guidelines to minimise in-person interactions. The move by governments to indefinitely suspend learning in schools, especially for adult learners, necessitated finding an alternative teaching and learning approach. E-learning emerged as the most appropriate approach to ensure continuity of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adults learning ML2 had to learn online to uphold the COVID-19 pandemic guidelines regarding social distancing and isolation. In the current study, 35 adults learning ML2 participated in online programmes. Their varied responses in the interviews exhibited mixed reactions to online learning. Some of the learners considered online learning appropriate for balancing family, work and learning. Others reported flexibility in access to course content and accomplishing individual tasks. However, the lack of inclusivity in access to vital resources and the possession of IT skills disadvantaged some learners. Learners who had limited access to the Internet and computers did not attend online classes. Similarly, learners who had no basic IT skills did not participate in online learning. The study opens up a debate on the viability of online learning and its potential adoption in ML2 online learning.

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Appendix

The Participants' Characteristics

Participant (Pseudo name) Gender (m/f)	Country of Origin	Age	Native language (L1)	Job	MaritalSta tus	Reasons for learning Maltese
1. Adefolake (f)	Nigeria	41	Yoruba	nurse	married to a Libyan man	"to communicate with patients and my Maltese friends"
2. Alfonso (m)	Portugal	47	Portuguese	teacher	single	"I fell in love with Malta, its spiritual energy and the Maltese people since they seem so friendly, helpful, traditional, and religious."
3. Ahmed (m)	Pakistan	48	Sindhi	nurse	single	"to interact with the old patients in my job"
4. Aksa (f)	Pakistan	64	Urdu	nurse	married to a Pakistani man	"for my work to understand those patients who do not know English"
5. Aksel (m)	Denmark	42	Danish	iGaming company affiliate manager	in a relation- -ship with a Maltese woman	"I am interested in Malta and its history and to talk in Maltese with my girlfriend."
6. Andrei (m)	Estonia	55	Estonian	consult- -ant	married to a Maltese	"I intend to keep on living in

					woman	Malta."
7. Brunilda (f)	Albania	53	Albanian	accountant	married to a Maltese man	"to understand my husband better"
8. Carlo (m)	Italy	56	Italian	clerk	in a relations--hip with a Maltese woman	"I love languages and I am fascinated by the Maltese language's history and grammar"
9. Charif (m)	Palestine	33	Palestinian Arabic	builder	single	"to obtain long term residence"
10. Clara (f)	Italy	51	Italian	translator	single mother	"for my work as a translator and to help my son with his Maltese homework"
11. Claudio (m)	Sicily	59	Italian	doctor	In a relation--ship with a Maltese woman	"I enjoy learning languages and appreciate that Maltese is keeping lots of Sicilian words which are lost in Sicilian."
12. Daniel (m)	Germany	32	German	student	single	"to integrate in Malta."
13. Danijela (f)	Macedo--nia	50	Macedonian	anaesthe--tist	married to a Serbian man	"for work"
14. Gabby (f)	English	57	English	maid	married	"to communicate better with my clients and because I wish to retire in Malta"
15. Halar (m)	Pakistan	44	Urdu	nurse	married to a Pakistani woman	"to entertain the Maltese patients"
16. Hilde (f)	Germany	41	German	engineer	in a relation- -ship with a Maltese man	"since I live in Malta, I want to be part of the culture and to understand my boyfriend better"
17. Irina (f)	Russia	36	Russian	housewi--fe	married to a Maltese man	"I want to understand my husband better."
18. Jane (f)	Greek	30	Greek	vet	married to a Maltese man	"to help me in my work and I find it an interesting language"

19. Jasmina (f)	Serbia	52	Serbian	team leader of a Cruise Liner	divorced and single mother	"I want to help my primary school daughter with her Maltese homework."
20. Jeremy (m)	England	46	English	barber	in a relation-ship with a Maltese woman	"I wish to communicate better with my girlfriend, her family, and with my clients."
21. Marika (f)	Italy	40	Italian	sales assistant	she lives with her Italian partner	"for work and to help my kids with their Maltese homework"
22. Martina (f)	Czech Republic	52	Czech	ICT assistant	single mother	"to integrate fully in the Maltese society"
23. Mohammed (m)	Libya	41	Arabic	unempl-oyed	married to a Libyan woman	"to find a job"
24. Namata (f)	India	78	Hindi	housew-ife	in a relation-ship with a Maltese man	"since I am living in Malta and my partner is Maltese"
25. Nataliya (f)	Ukraine	39	Ukrainian	hairedres-ser	single	"to understand and talk to the Maltese and my clients"
26. Nazia (f)	Pakistan	45	Urdu	nurse	separated	"it is required at my work"
27. Olga (f)	Russia	36	Russian	Casino dealer	married to a Maltese man	"to understand my husband and domestic workmen"
28. Robert (m)	England	36	English	English teacher	In a relation-ship with a Maltese woman	"to understand my girlfriend and her family"
29. Sabal (m)	India	53	Malayalam	nurse	separated	"for my professional and personal stability in Malta"
30. Saima (f)	Pakistan	32	Urdu	nurse	married to a Pakistani man	"because it is required at work"
31. Sister Shai (f)	Philippi-nes	44	Tagalog (Filipino)	nun	Catholic nun	"I want to understand and to talk more to the Maltese"

						people.”
32. Talin (f)	Netherlands	55	Dutch	Consular officer at the Embassy	In a relationship with a Maltese man	“for work at the embassy of the Netherlands in Malta”
33. Theo (m)	Sweden	44	Swedish	iGaming affiliate manager	single father	“I am learning Maltese as I am a single father of two daughters and living in Malta for good.”
34. Tytti (f)	Finland	42	Finnish	translator and content writer	divorced	“I like learning languages and I’m living in Malta.”
35. Vladimir (m)	Russia	55	Russian	writer	in a relationship with a Maltese woman	“I feel that Malta is a safe and peaceful place and I intend to keep on living in Malta for the rest of my life, and so I want to learn the language.”

INFO:-

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